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A False Picture of My Family

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When I was a child, my father called my attention to the words uttered by Boston attorney Joseph Welch during the 1954 Army-McCarthy hearings. Welch, at one dramatic moment, halted the Wisconsin senator in mid-sentence—Joe McCarthy was busy denouncing a young colleague of Welch for prior left-wing ties—and asked the senator: "Sir, will you not stop? Have you no sense of decency?"

The phrase has been reverberating in my mind in recent weeks, ever since Carol Felsenthal's book "Power, Privilege and The Post: The Katharine Graham Story" appeared in print. The book consists of a hideous caricature of my father and a slanderous depiction of my entire family.

If my father, the late Philip L. Graham, publisher of The Post until his death in 1963, championed one cause above all others, it was that of decency—decency vis à vis fellow human beings.

Yet in Felsenthal's callous account—the details of which have been rehearsed without skepticism in the book review pages of both The Post and the New York Times—Philip Graham is a cruel, power-mad, narcissistic antisemite.

All of this is a monstrous lie.

It is important to note that the chief victim of Felsenthal's inaccurate pen is my mother, Katharine Graham, chairman of the board of The Washington Post Co. Nor do I emerge from her false rendering of history unscathed. But at least my mother and I are alive and able to defend ourselves.

Moreover, my mother's role as one of the leading figures in American public life—a role of which we, her children, are enormously proud—stands virtually unchallenged. My father, on the other hand, is no longer with us. In August it will be 30 years since—at the age of 48—he took his own life.

Thus it falls to me, at least in part, to set the record straight. He was an extraordinary father and an extraordinary man. He was funny, charming, brilliant and kind.

Born in Terry, S.D., in 1915, Phil Graham soon moved with his family to Dade County, Fla., where his father, Ernest, worked on a sugar cane plantation. My father attended the University of Florida and then Harvard Law School, where he was elected president of the Law Review.

After graduating from Harvard Law in 1939, he went on to clerk on the Supreme Court for Justice Stanley Reed and then for Justice Felix Frankfurter. (Felsenthal seems never to wonder why Frankfurter, a leading figure in American Jewish life, would choose as his clerk and protege a crass antisemite.)

In 1941, my father, a staunch interventionist, worked in the Lend Lease program. When war broke out, he joined the U.S. Army.

He met and married Katharine Meyer in 1940. Felsenthal insists on describing my mother as some sort of victim—first of her allegedly tyrannical mother, then of my ostensibly cruel father. Female "victims" are, of course, in vogue these days. But my parents' friend, Philip Elman—the distinguished lawyer, Frankfurter clerk and Kennedy administration official—tells me that in fact my mother was pretty, engaging and altogether able to hold her own in intellectually challenging company. (Elman also writes that "I can say without any reservations or qualifications that I know of not a single iota of evidence to support allegations that Phil Graham was antisemitic.")

Phil Graham became associate publisher of The Washington Post in January 1946. Six months later, my grandfather, Eugene Meyer, who had bought The Post in 1933, left to become president of the World Bank and appointed my father publisher.

Contrary to Felsenthal's twisted account, my father enjoyed a close and affectionate relationship with my mother's father, an investment banker who had also headed the Reconstruction Finance Corp. and the Federal Reserve Board.

As publisher of The Post, Philip Graham proceeded to build what is today a formidable communications empire. He started in 1948 by purchasing a majority stock position in WTOP radio, the local CBS affiliate. Two years later, he engineered—with my grandfather—the purchase of the local CBS television affiliate. In 1953, he bought another TV station—WJXT in Jacksonville, Fla. Soon thereafter he and my grandfather acquired the Washington Times-Herald, a rival newspaper. That purchase represented a turning point in the history of The Washington Post. In 1961 he made his final major corporate acquisition, purchasing Newsweek magazine. (The deal has been described as the "journalistic steal of the century.")

Aside from building a vast company committed to making public information accessible, Phil Graham, as the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote shortly after my father's death, wielded "immense influence on people and affairs behind the scenes in Washington." For example, he was by all accounts instrumental in the passage of the 1957 civil rights bill, and he helped to lay the groundwork for

legislation giving Washington its first measure of home rule.

Phil Graham gave all of his children a prism through which to view people and life. He taught us a creed summarized in a letter he wrote to me in 1960: "Each of us is equally a unique individual, deserving of the common decencies . . ."

Felsenthal's book and the reviews it has received promote the conclusion that my three brothers and I endured a painful childhood, burdened by one parent who was a veritable monster and another who was nothing more than a pitiful victim. Nothing could be further from the truth. Growing up in our house was fun, just as it was intellectually stimulating. Yes, we met presidents and kingmakers and scholars. But we also benefited from the warmth and attention of two intensely devoted parents.

My father taught us that ideas matter. Indeed, to read his letters and speeches is to encounter a man consumed by ideas. He envisaged and even sketched out—as Felsenthal herself acknowledges—much of what was soon to be known as "The Great Society."

As we were walking up Madison Avenue a few years ago, my mother confided to me that we'd been spoiled—that there wouldn't be another man like him in our lives. I know he would have been immensely proud of the way she has performed as one of America's premier corporate executives.

Toward the end of his short life, my father's mind was ravaged by a cruel and unforgiving emotional illness—one that was attended by aberrant behavior. (Today, the illness is treated pharmacologically.) It required him to be hospitalized. From his hospital, he wrote to me on July 20, 1963: "I'll keep trying, and before long I'll be doing better." As it turned out, he could try no longer. A few days later he took his own life.

A young man—also suffering from depression—spent time in the same hospital and came to know my father. He wrote to me shortly after my father's death: "Phil was the father I wish I'd had. . . . He made me feel bigger than I am; he made me strong when I was weak, understanding when I was bigoted, kind when I was mean, clever when I was dull, intelligent when I was stupid, and a man when I was a boy. The Greeks would have called him a god."

My father, of course, was not a god. But as Schlesinger wrote in a Times of London obituary: "The premature death of Philip Graham brings the life of one of the most brilliant Americans of his generation to a tragic end." This view of my father was widespread among those who knew him.

For me, this is not an easy column. I'm uncomfortable with personal revelations; but I'm even more uncomfortable with the notion that Felsenthal's lies about my family will go unchallenged. Why not let the truth form part of the permanent record?

Phil Graham, after all, was animated by a vision, which his wife and children have endeavored to carry forward. He held that The Washington Post should be "an independent newspaper, fixed with a love of liberty, capable of indignation over injustice, and aware of the destiny and responsibility of America as a world leader."

Such were his views. But it's also well to remember that he—like my mother and her children—believed in the overriding importance of simple and fundamental human decency.